

How to Save A Life

In 1972, the philosopher Peter Singer [proposed](#) a simple thought experiment: Imagine you're on your way to work and you come across a child drowning in a shallow pond. You're tall enough that you can run in and rescue him, but if you do so you'll ruin your new suit. Should you save the child?

Almost everyone says yes: the value of saving a child's life far outweighs the cost of losing your new suit. Indeed, someone who would let a child die to save their clothes seems like a monster.

But aha, Singer says. You — yes, *you*, the reader — probably spent several hundred dollars on new clothes recently, clothes you didn't really need. (Or if not clothes, perhaps a dinner out, or music, or books you could've gotten from the library.) And instead of spending that money on luxuries, you could have [sent it to Partners in Health](#), and they could have used it to save a child's life in the developing world. ([GiveWell](#) estimates that you can save a life for between \$150-\$750.) How are you not a monster?

Calling your audience monsters is a dangerous move — it's apt to make them very upset. (I know I got very upset the first time I read this argument!) Nobody wants to be thought of as a murderer, so people come up with all sorts of rationalizations for why they don't give (it's not my responsibility, I do my fair share, foreign aid doesn't really do any good, etc.). In his recent book, [The Life You Can Save](#), Singer sets about systematically debunking these arguments.

In the process, he complicates his original thought experiment. Imagine now that instead of just you walking by the pond, five people are. And imagine that five children are also drowning. Still, he argues, most people would say you should rush in to save a child — even if the other people passing by don't.

But there's one detail Singer leaves out — one that I think dramatically affects his conclusions: the children didn't just wander into this pond on their own; they were pushed.

Imagine an evil man stands above the pond, grabbing children and throwing them in. People passing by see the children and rush in to try to save them, but as soon as one is saved or drowns, in goes another, and another, and another. You can rush in to try to save another child — or you can try to stop the man.

This doesn't absolve you of moral duty. Most people do neither — they just walk on by the pond. But it does complicate the question. I think most people would say you should try to stop the man, if you can. Even a utilitarian analysis would suggest this: diving in the pond saves one life, stopping the man saves thousands.

The man, of course, is economics. People in the developing world are poor because they live in poor countries — countries without schools or good jobs or welfare programs or even running water. And their countries are poor in large part because of us.

It's often said that visiting a developing country is like traveling back in time — the conditions seem little changed from those of medieval Europe. But how did medieval Europe stop being medieval Europe? The answer is through protectionism: Britain became the reigning world power by being one of the most protectionist countries on earth, expending enormous amounts of government money to promote local industries. Eventually these industries grew strong enough to compete on the world stage and it withdrew the barriers. The United States eventually surpassed it with more of the same — many long years of tariffs and industrial intervention (to this day the US government spends an enormous amount of money on R&D). Western Europe, the so-called "Asian tigers" — all the major developed countries of our era got there by following these principles.

But they don't want others to follow in their footsteps. Instead of letting developing countries grow and compete in their own right, they'd prefer to use them as a source of cheap labor and raw materials. So enormous effort has been expended on building international institutions to prevent their economic growth. The World Bank and the IMF issue loans to countries, but only on the condition they dismantle all forms of protectionism. The WTO requires countries to agree to principles of "free trade". Academic "experts" come up with reasons why protectionism really hurts everyone and rewrite the history of economic growth.

As a result, poor countries are forced to stay poor and children keep dying in shallow ponds.

Stopping this is hard. I can give you a phone number to call to donate to Oxfam and buy a child life-saving treatment. There's no comparably-effective way to help reform the WTO. Nobody knows how to stop the evil man. But it seems weird to pretend that he doesn't exist.

Singer considers this a purely practical question. As a utilitarian, he doesn't support the notion that we have any special responsibility for the actions of our government. Instead, he says, people should donate to help the poor in the most effective way they can see — whether that's saving lives or structural reform is up to them. But Singer pretty clearly doesn't think structural reform is very effective; all of his examples are about people directly saving lives.

Would the passers-by really just keep jumping in the pond after the children he kept throwing? Or would they take a moment to stop and strategize and think of how to stop the evil man. I think most would do the latter. This isn't an abstract question. Children are dying right now. What are you going to do?

You can donate to the Student Trade Justice Campaign [here](#). Please post your suggestions on worthy groups in the comments.

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